

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

William Stephenson, *Gonzo Republic: Hunter S. Thompson's America* (Continuum, 2012)

William Stephenson, in his new study of Hunter S. Thompson the man and the writer, seeks, perhaps above all else, to give his subject the benefit of the doubt. This should not surprise readers. After all, Stephenson, a senior lecturer in modernist and postmodernist literature, finds as his subject an American writer who, as very few others before or after, not only grew in fame as a writer but established singlehandedly a new genre, a new way of expressing oneself in a rapidly changing world. Readers are left to judge whether he deserves Stephenson's sympathetic scrutiny.

The word 'gonzo' or 'gonzo journalism' and the expression 'fear and loathing' will always be associated with Thompson, a writer who today may not be read, but continues to be remembered and revered. Stephenson does his best to explain the origins of each. Typical of Stephenson, the writer's contribution to his age is placed in historical context, a context that begins in the near past, but which often stretches far beyond. Stephenson sees Thompson's role in modern literature multi-generationally, from the early Modernists such as T.S. Eliot to his contemporaries such as Norman Mailer, Tom Wolfe and Williams Burroughs. However, he locates the man and his work in the context of his times and in reaction to current events. This, it would seem, is the essence of 'gonzo':

Writing on 22 November 1963, the day of Kennedy's assassination, Thompson used the phrase 'fear and loathing' for the first time, as a description of his gut reaction to the murder. He perhaps borrowed it unconsciously from Søren Kierkegaard's nineteenth-century existentialist interpretation of the story of Abraham and Isaac, *Fear and Trembling*. Thompson later denied the connection with Kierkegaard: the phrase 'came straight out of what I felt ... I just remember thinking about Kennedy, that this is so bad I needed new words for it.' Douglas Brinkley states that Thompson's source for the phrase 'fear and loathing' was Thomas Wolfe's novel *The Web and the Rock*, published posthumously in 1939. *The Web and the Rock's* protagonist, George Webber, is appalled by the squalor of his own background: 'Drowning! Drowning! Not to be endured! The abominable memory shrivels, shrinks and withers up his heart in the cold constriction of its fear and loathing.' (101)

Kennedy and, we will find out, Richard M. Nixon played important roles in the forming of Hunter S. Thompson's world view. It is to some extent a way of seeing things that men and women of his generation shared. There was Kennedy and his Camelot, a moment of hope, one might say, that intelligence, charm and justice might win out in the end. Nixon, the author points out, came to be seen by Thompson and his contemporaries as the incarnation of evil or, at the very least, the end of American innocence.

I said earlier that Stephenson takes Thompson seriously. It should perhaps be pointed out that Stephenson seems to take everything about Thompson seriously, including his adolescent view of history, his romanticism and his shameless naiveté. All the same, the author persuades this reader that that these were precisely the necessary ingredients for Thompson's unique style of writing. The haphazard has a way of emerging from the ill-considered. Stephenson explains how Thompson's stylistic inventiveness was born from his having sent unedited pages of his notebook for publication. He had expected to be rejected,

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but instead readers were impressed. 'It was like falling down and elevator shaft and landing in a pool full of mermaids,' Thompson boasted gleefully.

Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas and *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* are the titles of works most commonly associated with the Thompson brand. Like the Beats, he succeeded in turning his writing into a lifestyle and is as well known for that as he is for his special brand of journalism. It is a career that had very little staying power, having gone out of style along with the politicians who took America to war in Southeast Asia. This seems difficult for Stephenson to understand or accept, although he certainly acknowledges Thompson's inability to move on:

One commonly held view of Thompson is that he peaked in the early seventies with the two *Fear and Loathing* books and was in personal and literary decline ever since; a slow slide induced not only by the limitations of his Gonzo style and persona, but also by the staleness of repetition and the cumulative effects of his Olympian booze and drug intake. Although Thompson contributed more material to *Rolling Stone* in the early 1990s than he had since 1976, 'most of it was seen as lower-level self-imitation. (15).

Thompson thrived on what many of his admirers seem to need: a belief that everything was better in the 60s. Stephenson makes note of the fact that Thompson's idea of utopia excluded gays and women. His was a man's world:

This is the central form of sexism in Thompson's work: outright misogyny, though present in his writing, is rarer than the consistent exclusion of females from the frontier and the edge, and therefore from Thompson's project of self-realization. (121)

He was an outright homophobe and was involved in activities as described by Stephenson that today would land him in jail.

Thompson, it would seem, saw politics as a kind of John Belushi toga-party or panty-raid for drugged or intoxicated adolescent boys. No doubt he had a lot of fun, but the fact remains that not only women but a lot of men are simply sick of this form of protest, whatever its merits might be. Women are tired of being excluded and gays are tired of being bashed over the head.

It would seem that Thompson grew tired, too. He committed suicide at his home on 20th February 2005.

Stephenson's work may not have persuaded me to admire Hunter S. Thompson, but it is doubtful that this was his goal. Instead, he asks that Thompson be seen as a phenomenon of the modern age. Thompson's project is to be understood as a form of exhibitionism, as much a part of our time as the dastardly and heroic deeds that animated his inflamed imagination. Stephenson writes with clarity and depth. His project makes reading about Thompson a pleasure.

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